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Ant 285

Final Ethnography

“What Is a Non-Traditional Student at Illinois State?”

It was very interesting when I was perusing the catalog of classes at Heartland Community College: the volume of classes that were built into the evening were astounding. There were a significant number of classes for the evening professional: classes utilizing a significant portion of the campus to make classes available for a timeframe that needed a bit more flexibility. By contrast, Illinois State’s catalog strove for banker’s hours, trying to maintain a shorter and more compact day. The much closer to rigid flexibility in the class structure, including necessary major classes in the middle of the day, seemed to preclude potential students who needed to attend an evening class. Thinking on this, it began to dawn on me that this was a definite road block between Illinois State and the non-traditional student. Intrigued, I wanted to look into this further: why would a smaller school provide a much more flexible schedule than a larger one, especially when the smaller school has fewer faculty and less space to work in?

I began to look into Illinois State University, probing a bit deeper. I wanted to know what the school was looking for in its student body and too see if the results of the student body reflected this. My very basic research, which consisted of simply navigating over to their page “Who Is an Adult Learner?” when I the school narrowed down the perception for me (http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult_learner_services/who_is.shtml). ISU clearly stated that 2,354 students in the school were considered non-traditional by the school’s standards. This was intriguing: I had found resistance built into their programs against gaining a Bachelor’s Degree in

their own schedule, yet 13% of the 17,885 students in the school population consisted of non-traditional students.

I felt it was important to take a closer look into this; after all, if ISU has a school that has a non-traditional student population that big, wouldn't it warrant closer investigation as to what ISU considers a non-traditional student? The larger demographic make-up of the non-traditional student body intrigued me: these varieties added a large variable to the student population, but does the school really know what a non-traditional student is? Or is it that they're just grouping them in this way, without actually knowing what to do about that part of the population. I broke down the ethnography in the following parts to do my research: it consisted of internal and external research, along with interviews of both Illinois State University faculty and students. From this interview and research, I was able to begin to better understand what a non-traditional student was at ISU and hold that against the school's version.

To begin, though, the major reason behind the research was me. I stumbled upon something interesting during my explorations of Illinois State and wanted to further this. While attending Heartland, I found they were very accommodating towards my schedule that demanded I put work before class. Offered a number of classes that fit a variety of different options, I was given more and more room to decide my class path to undertake. Their class restrictions for graduation requirements had a large amount of variety in them, posing fewer restrictions on topic matters and (more importantly) a way to plan my classes based around time instead of required courses. By contrast, Illinois State University was offering a much more difficult and direct class schedule.

Entering into the English department at Illinois State University, they had a number of classes that were requirements for graduating from the department. Specifically, classes like the genre classes (Prose, Poetry, Drama, and Rhetoric) along with the American and British Literature courses put a cramp on the class options. Even worse, many of these classes were only offered during the day or the very early afternoon, precluding students who needed late afternoon or evening classes to complete their schedule for getting many hours done in the department with ease. This was a far cry from the Heartland English department, which had few restrictions and a large amount of variety offered. Additionally, due to the number of faculty and classrooms, they weren't able to continue to offer classes to students filling up the major or allow for evening classes to reduce the class volume tension.

This began a snowballing thought process for me. Why did the school have a reaction this way? What was causing the school to prevent additional evening classes or allow for more flexibility with 13% of their student population? Then, I began to think about just what ISU thought of its non-traditional student population. Did they think they would be fine on their own, that a non-traditional student should be more resourceful than a traditional one? Did they think they needed to allow for fewer accommodations for students like these because they may not be in as big of a rush as other ISU students to get out? But as I began to wonder what accommodations these students would need: were they easily identifiable, useful for all of the different non-traditional students in the school? Or were they more varied, possibly with as much variation as the non-traditional student body these needs emanated from?

Just what was a “non-traditional student,” anyway?

With my interest peaked, I began to look into this a little bit further. Perhaps my interest, which was rooted in the most basic part of the student population to me (of course, this was myself), was an excellent justification for trying to answer my questions. But it boiled down to me needing one answer in particular before I could go any further satiating the needs of my interest. I needed to find out what was a non-traditional student at ISU, and I went about it in the following way.

My research method consisted of the following. I began by researching Illinois State University, its website, and its faculty. The idea was that the information I needed should be readily available at this level: the question was quite basic, so any answers should be easily accessible. My research of the Illinois State consisted of finding both facts about the school as well as its student population make-up through the non-traditional student site. My web research consisted of simply taking information from the Illinois State pages, and sometimes comparing it to information from other college webpages to see comparisons.

My interviewing technique, which I used for interviewing both student and faculty, consisted of my sitting down with the other individual and asking them a series of questions. I went off a few notes that I had, but for the most part, my goal was to get the subject to speak while I jotted their responses. I conducted all of the interviews in places that were comfortable for the subjects, allowing them to speak on their own level as opposed to having to deal with unfamiliar surroundings. I also only used a digital audio recorder once, finding that the one time I did use it that it heightened the tension in the room and made the subject uncomfortable. Even turning off the recorder and letting the subject know that I was still conducting the interview, only that it would be my notes that I went off of, made the subject significantly more at ease.

These were the two methods that I was restricted to, seeing as how participant observation is out of the question when there weren't any student meetings and no real way to identify non-traditional students without reverting to bias. I did conduct one participation observation, which I will include in here, but that was only because they student disclosed during the class that they were a non-traditional student (and its results will be included). However, I did not conduct observations before or after that because the student did not voluntarily disclose at other moments and I didn't want to indict the non-traditional student in other classroom settings if they weren't attempting to stand out for that reason. There was an additional issue of having to guess whether or not other students in the class were also non-traditional by any standards (either their own or ISU's), but did not feel comfortable revealing that at the time of the discussion. I also had issues with getting students to sign the IRB forms. No less than three students refused to sign the forms based on the fact that that would be the only way to link the students to the study and they were not comfortable doing that. More of this will be included in the afterward.

What became interesting as I began to do my research was the perception of the non-traditional student varied within the school's own definitions. There was one list of student definitions on the Illinois State website for Adult Learners (http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult_learner_services/who_is.shtml) and a different one of the Non-Traditional Student Association website (http://www.studentclubs.ilstu.edu/nsa/nsa__we_work_to_help_nontrads.htm). This should have foreshadowed that if the school couldn't even agree on its own definition, how fragmented of a definition would I find while conducting my own research. While going through my research, the one thing that I continued to discover and re-discover was how people could both acknowledge the official definition of a non-traditional student and how that might not apply in every situation.

Even more interesting was how many of these students who fell under the non-traditional definition did not consider themselves non-traditional. My research also opened up better questions to further my inquiries. How I was going about trying to identify the non-traditional student at ISU became more and more jarring as I realized that non-traditional students, ultimately, were self-defined because there was no overarching definition for the non-traditional student. Also, the other bit of information that I discovered was that my subjects seemed to agree that if there was a unification aspect to non-traditional students (which was not a Registered Student Organization), then they would have something to hold onto to help define themselves as non-traditional student.

My research began with the Illinois State University website on Adult Learners/ Non-traditional Students. The school's definition and stats on non-traditional students were clearly laid out on the website in an easy to find location. They also included links immediately to the left of the website to help students further their immediate information on non-traditional students at ISU. However, following up on those links became more than a little difficult. Many of the faculty and students associated with the website were unable to match schedules with a non-traditional student (one who couldn't just "swing by" during office hours), or suffered from an inability to return e-mails. However, through this research, I was able to get myself into contact with one member associated with the website.

Mary was a faculty advisor for non-traditional students at Illinois State University. While her job encompassed many other aspects of study, the important parts that I wanted to focus on dealt with her interactions with non-traditional students. The following is an excerpt from my presentation:

In another an interview, this time with an Illinois State University academic Non-traditional advisor I was able to narrow down the definition from an advisor's perspective, as well as get information about both the major problems non-traditional students face and what the school can do for non-traditional students. From the beginning, she wanted me to understand that the school definition was not the definition the Office of Enrollment Management and Academic Services uses. The advisor stated that the U's definitions were inadequate, so they assisted students who considered themselves non-traditional and not just students the school listed as non-traditional. She stated that non-trads at ISU are students suffering from these problems whether or not they fell into the school's definition. These are some of the additional "non-traditional" students she assists that don't fall under the ISU definition.

Additionally, from the interview, Mary informed me of the following things. First and foremost, that if there was a problem between the non-traditional students and the school that couldn't be resolved, they would consider sending the student to other universities in the area or to inform them that they might want to attempt an online university. When I spoke with an admissions counselor at another local university (Michael), he reiterated what I was told, though he stated he was unable to find out the effect of this on the school.

Mary also stated that the impact of Heartland Community College's large push for enrollment was still too young to gauge, and that her department wouldn't be able to gauge an impact for a few years to come. Mary mentioned that there were few things she was able to do to help students that many of them didn't already know about on their own, which both showed the resourcefulness of many of the students that she was dealing with, as well as their awareness of their situation at ISU (dealing with a school that sometimes treats them like it doesn't want them

there). However, the resourcefulness may be a bit misleading, since the students would have to do some research on their own just to find Mary's department. Those students who seek her out are going to be the ones that already have access to some of the resources that they need to succeed in an occasionally hostile environment.

I conducted another interview with an ISU faculty member, Patrick. The summation of the interview I previously posted, but would like to include here:

The subject spent a vast majority of time with people from the RSO, meaning that the friends were also people that shared a time-consuming extracurricular. Subject had a roommate from August 2003 - May 2004 (the non-traditional student had a very traditional dorm experience for both years on ISU's campus) and a full load of courses, but neither of these things deterred time from being spent with RSO students. Subject actually moved into the dorms with another member of the RSO in Fall 04, meaning that all of the subject's time was spent exclusively with the RSO members and friends formed from it. Subject only spoke of friends from the RSO in Fall 04 (not mentioning family or previous professors, though they may have been included in the overall "Who are your friends at ISU?" question). Weekends were spent on campus or at other campuses in this semester with RSO members. The subject also mentioned that the Summer of 2004 was spent almost entirely with RSO members.

I broadened my question scope by just a bit for further information. I asked the subject if the RSO was what kept the subject at ISU, to which they responded, "yes." They stated that if it had not been for the RSO, they would have attended another school (probably NIU). Because of the support group found in the RSO and mixture of traditional and non-

traditional students in the activity, the subject was able to have a positive experience at ISU that they would not have had at all without the RSO.

Subject also volunteered that they went to the ISU Preview in Summer 2003 for non-traditional students and was turned off to every activity. Subject stated that all of the activities were either bureaucratically or logistically based with no social activities (subject was invited to seminars on how to succeed as a non-traditional student or the differences between the educational experience they would get versus traditional students, but that there was no attempt to form either a social network or a support group).

Patrick revealed a few key elements towards the socialization element of ISU: namely, that he was able to consider himself a traditional student because he was surrounded by traditional students. By focusing on this, his focus was different than it is for some students who don't have that group to focus with, or who don't have the opportunity to become a part of the school's social network due to personal life constraints and/ or an inability to work professional and personal life around academic schedules.

One other part of the interview came to mind, which I included in my presentation and would like to come back to here:

During the interview, he wanted me to take note of the following self-fulfilling prophecy at ISU: ISU is a traditional student school; ISU assumes non-trads who go to ISU will assimilate themselves into the traditional student body. Because ISU doesn't offer much for non-traditional students, those students will either gravitate toward the traditional student bodies or find themselves excluded in the school. He believes this leads non-trads

to often think of themselves as traditional students or as part of an excluded minority. I concluded the interview by asking him to categorize a non-traditional student or how he would define them: he stated that it was a situation to situation definition and that one narrow or broad definition would fail to encompass them all or could include students that didn't actually fall in the category.

Between both the aspects of the self-fulfilling prophecy and the inability to define non-traditional students at ISU, I felt like this interview was key in understanding the qualms of the non-traditional student when facing the university. Additionally, it was enlightening to hear this information from someone who was also a faculty member and understood the problems of dealing with a non-traditional student in the classroom.

One of my more enjoyable interviews was with a non-traditional student, Bryan, who seemed to refuse to take the interview terribly seriously. He did not consider himself a non-traditional student, but was very keen on explaining the information that he had with me. Specifically, he was comfortable sharing his journey through school and how he ended up as both a non-traditional student and at ISU. Another student who was non-traditional but did not consider himself one, he kept referring to his time at college as the “college experience he expected” and that he was “certainly not something unusual.” It was strange, the resistance I was getting when I was pressing for information. It was like he was ready to be interviewed, but only to let me know that the definition came from the eye of the beholder and not some arbitrary age established by the federal government and Illinois State University.

One final personal interview I conducted was with James, an admissions counselor at Lincoln College. I wanted to know the effects of Heartland Community College’s non-traditional

student increase, as well as how students who may have been driven away from ISU ended up at Lincoln. He stated that most students who arrived there as non-traditional students ended up finding large amounts of success at the school, ready to take on classes. Most non-traditional students that he dealt with were capable students who could have thrived at ISU had they not been pushed aside. While he stated that they were still years off from being able to talk about specific numbers or the effects of Heartland and ISU on Lincoln based on quantitative analysis, he did state that there was a noticeable difference in his job.

What was interesting was some of the more general data that I gathered. While I was unable to fully conduct interviews with three students who refused to sign IRB forms (though they did volunteer other information), through casual conversation I was able to glean some level of understanding about non-traditional students from the current student population. Many of the traditional students did not view the obviously non-traditional students (single females, thirties and up) with high level of respect, often considering them unintelligent. However, if the students were significantly older (closer to retirement age), the student population was proud of their ability to come back to school to continue education and possibly finish up a degree. Also, these students thought professors were a little too lenient with the non-traditional students and wanted equal treatment in the classrooms (sometimes thinking the professor gave the non-traditional students the favor of the doubt on papers or tests, though there was no evidence to back this up). The traditional students indicated they rarely, if ever, instigated communication with the non-traditional students, thinking that it would be weird or that they wouldn't have anything to talk about. These preconceived notions seemed almost universal across the casual conversations I conducted with people about non-traditional students inside of classes.

With all of this information, I feel that ISU could certainly take a look at some of the following ideas. The following recommendations were taken from my Moodle page:

The common theme that I have found during my research is that there is a certain amount of common ground between the ISU Non-traditional Students and the ISU faculty that work with them: both want to do more for non-trads, but there isn't a ton of ideas floating around that could really assist either group. The faculty feels somewhat helpless because they don't know what they are supposed to do to help out non-trads as a whole: each have such specific individual restrictions that it is almost too difficult to handle anything except on a case-by-case basis. The students don't have a ton of major requests because they are so personal or individually tailored that they aren't requests for non-traditional students as a whole, but for one or a few students in particular.

The one goal that seems to be common among both groups is the idea of maximizing the time spent on-campus or aiding in time-management, which seems to be the most valuable commodity with the non-trads. What are my personal recommendations that I would extend to the university? In order to better help non-trads at ISU maximize their time, the following accommodations could be made: there could be a non-traditional student lounge, parking exceptions, and a class schedule preference. Of course, all three of these things are impractical, but they are the most common requests from students and have some support in the faculty.

The idea behind the non-trad student lounge would be a place where people who don't live on campus could gather for a quick scan of what's going on in campus, while also allowing

people who can't jump back and forth between home and class when they have an hour to kill a place to study that isn't the library. Additionally, a room like this would work as an excellent common ground for non-trads looking for a way to get together for study or support sessions, along with actually allowing concurrent growth in the non-trad student body.

The parking exceptions might be a little more difficult, but for people who are working around a much tighter schedule, it would certainly assist if it only took someone 5 minutes to walk to class instead of 15. That, of course, would require a stricter definition of "Non-Traditional" in order to provide the passes to those in need, but it is plausible.

The class schedule preference is the most difficult. Because classes are determined by department (including times) and not the university, there is no way to streamline classes for the non-trads to have a fully workable evening schedule (something both Heartland and Lincoln offer). Thus, the non-trads would need to have more flexibility with the classes they are choosing to take, so allowing them preferred registration would assist with them getting the classes they need to graduate.

The other recommendation that was proposed was to make sure that all of the non-traditional student housing (such as at Cardinal Court) be included in the university wide ad campaigns. Often, students in the dorms would have flyers posted that would not be put up elsewhere. I believe this may simply be an oversight and should be quite easy to fix.

I feel that this does encompass most of it. However, I feel like I should stress the following two pieces of information that I have also picked up. During my research, I found that there is ISU precedent for the university to push on different departments to allow class scheduling for non-traditional students. This was discovered during my researching of the ISU Archives. *The Thirteenth Decade, Illinois State University, 1977-1987* on pages 79 and 80 talks about the impact of the non-traditional student population in the 1980s. Because they were such a significant portion of the student body (20% at its peak, though it may not have been any larger than the current 13% when it was first conceived) that was non-traditional, ISU formed the college for continuing education. A larger, more formal body would be better able to handle the pressures of such a varied student body while focusing on the good of the school and the student, and not just one at the expense of the other.

I feel that future research into this area could be greatly helpful for ISU. While I think the current recommendations are solid enough on their own, the school could certainly see if there were additional avenues they could take to help the student body. I feel that ignoring 13% of the student population, or giving them a token number of employees in the school who have jobs that aren't even entirely focused on that part of the student body, is detrimental to the growth of the non-traditional student population at Illinois State University. Further, I feel that taking additional steps in both research and action would be beneficial. A step into the ISU technology department to see what ISU is doing with distance learning would be really helpful for the people who are not able to always commit to class times for their major. However, the impact of that on the non-traditional population should be weighed in with the benefits of the traditional population, since distance learning would probably be developed for both parties. Additionally, speaking with the deans of different departments to see what individual colleges would be, while time consuming,

greatly enlightening towards the different schools approaches toward this increasing part of their student body. Taking into account both of these future interview subjects would great enhance knowledge about what the non-traditional student experience at ISU will be in the future, and not just in the now.

A. I am a non-traditional student at Illinois State University who wants to simply finish up as quickly as possible. I would like to get as many benefits out of the school as I can, especially considering the amount of money that I'm putting into it at this time, but I know that I have to pick and choose what I can and cannot do based on my personal time constraints. However, I sometimes feel that I have no options at the school simply because it doesn't make them known or available to students who would be interested in them. Had it not been for this research, I would have never known, for example, that ISU even had a non-traditional student advisor that could work as a mediator between myself and any departments if I was having an issue. It is because of things like these that I think my question of "What is a non-traditional student at Illinois State University?" becomes so important. Without that answering that question, ISU has prevented itself from helping students who fall into that category. Now, I do believe that the non-traditional student can define themselves at ISU, and that they have to self-identify as one before they school can. However, that can also be consider a partial aspect of the student body, one that is driven more by social motivation. In order for ISU to truly help this 13% of their population, they need to step back and answer that question, directly, for the school.